Kwarandzyey and the Semantic Typology of Pluractionality

Cross-linguistically, pluractionality is rarely explicitly marked on all verbs; more commonly, it is marked on a limited subset partly definable in semantic terms. Unlike nominal plurality, for which nouns higher on the Animacy Hierarchy are more likely to be marked for plurality (Smith-Stark 1974; Corbett 2000), the factors affecting which verbs have pluractional counterparts have not been well-described on a global scale; but across a wide range of North American languages, the subset in question tends to consist of verbs of position, handling, basic motion, and killing and dying (Booker 1982; Mithun 1988). Corbett (2000:258), following Mithun, tentatively characterises this class as describing “situations where the nature of the event or state is substantially affected by the number of participants involved.” However, Kwarandzyey – a Songhay language of southern Algeria – presents a challenge for any effort to extend this characterisation to the rest of the world. In Kwarandzyey, those classes rarely or never have corresponding pluractionals; instead, the class for which pluractionals are most consistently found is processes affecting a patient's physical integrity or shape (“break”, “tear”, “bend”, “dig”...). Within this class, pluractional formation by stem reduplication is productive enough to apply to Arabic loans as well as inherited words.

This difference corresponds to a difference in the semantics of pluractionality. In contrast to most North American languages discussed, the Kwarandzyey pluractional turns out to indicate event-internal number in the sense of Cusic (1981), without reference to participant number; it is used when the event described by the corresponding simplex stem applies multiply to each participant. For instance, a pluractional is inappropriate for “the cups broke” if each cup simply broke in half, but appropriate for “the cup(s) broke” if each cup broke into many pieces:

(in response to picture of two cups each broken into many pieces)
Ikas i̯na=γ=yu, i-bbaγ-baγ
cup two=DEM=PL 3P=break-REDUP
“These two cups, they've broken (into bits).”

(in response to picture of two cups each broken into two pieces)
Ikas i̯na=γ=yu, i-bbaγ ifər=tsa
cup two=DEM=PL 3P-break half=LOC
“These two cups, they've broken in half.”

This suggests that the distinction between event-internal and event-external number is typologically relevant not just to the Aktionsart of the participating verbs, as found by Wood (2007), but also to their reference. Event-internal number, unlike event-external number, has no overlap with participant number, and the set of verbs for which event-internal number is particularly salient thus has little in common with those for which event-external number is most salient.

References